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NEWS POLITICS WASHINGTON

Under Donald Trump, drone strikes far exceed Obama's numbers

By S. E. Cupp | May 9, 2019, 3:00am GMT+8

In this 2013 file photo, an X47-B Navy drone grabs the wire as it lands aboard the nuclear aircraft carrier USS George H. W. Bush off the Virginia coast. | AP Photo/Steve Helber

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If I gave you a pop quiz on recent current events, I bet you'd do pretty well, thanks to a 24-hour cable news cycle, late night talk shows, social media and popular culture.

You undoubtedly know that Prince Harry and Meghan Markle had their first child this week. You can likely go into some detail about the Mueller report. You probably have an opinion of Attorney General William Barr.

> OPINION

But what would you say if I asked you the following multiple choice question?

When it comes to President Obama's drone wars, President Trump has:

> A. Ended them B. Continued them C. Escalated them

You're forgiven for not knowing the answer. It's C. This administration has not only surpassed the previous one's drone strike volume overseas, it has made the drone wars even more secretive, if that's possible.

We can cobble together some reporting on the numbers, but finding exact figures on drone strikes in the Trump administration is difficult. More on that in a minute.

According to a 2018 report in The Daily Beast, Obama launched 186 drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan during his first two years in office. In Trump's first two years, he launched 238.

The Trump administration has carried out 176 strikes in Yemen in just two years, compared with 154 there during all eight years of Obama's tenure, according to a count by The Associated Press and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

Experts also say drone strikes under President Trump have surged in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

And, as was the case during Obama's presidency, these strikes have resulted in untold numbers of civilian casualties. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan killed more than 150 civilians in the first nine months of 2018.

Amnesty International reports drones have killed at least 14 civilians in Somalia since 2017.

As of January of this year, U.S. drone strikes fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria have killed at least 1,257 civilians, according to the Pentagon, and a monitoring group, Airwars, estimates the number to be as great as 7,500.

That you might not be aware of what should be a startling and deeply troubling escalation in unaccountable remote-control warfare by the U.S. is both by design and default.

For one, the Obama administration paved the way for popularizing and normalizing drone wars, which also included the extrajudicial killing of U.S. citizens, first by hiding it, then by begrudgingly acknowledging it, and then by pretending to meaningfully constrain it.

Obama eventually put in place arcane requirements to issue public reports on civilian death tolls (but just in certain military theaters), to limit targets to high-level militants (again, in certain battlefields), and require interagency approval (also only for certain targets).

Trump has peeled back all of those requirements because, well, he can. We now know more than we did about U.S. drone wars when Obama first took office, but less than when he left.

You can also blame cowardly, partisan politics for hearing little from lawmakers about these escalations. Republicans, of course, no longer criticize these sorts of things — even if they subscribe to Trump's Obama-rebuking, "America First" isolationism. And Democrats who might take issue with unaccountable wars and civilian deaths know

to do so they'd have to acknowledge Obama's role in the mess, and so …Trump's tax returns it is.

You can't, however, blame the media for this one. Refreshingly, many mainstream outlets have been reporting on this escalation for months if not years. From Foreign Policy to The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal to Fox News, The Washington Post to CNN, the issue is getting coverage. Whether Americans care or not is another story.

De-escalating our involvement — even shadow or unmanned — in overseas conflicts was something that many Trump critics and supporters were welcoming, especially abroad. One CBC headline from 2016 read, "Drone King Barack Obama will not be missed." Another, from The Guardian: "At least President Trump would ground the drones."

It was all wishful thinking.

S.E. Cupp is the host of "S.E. Cupp Unfiltered" on CNN.

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